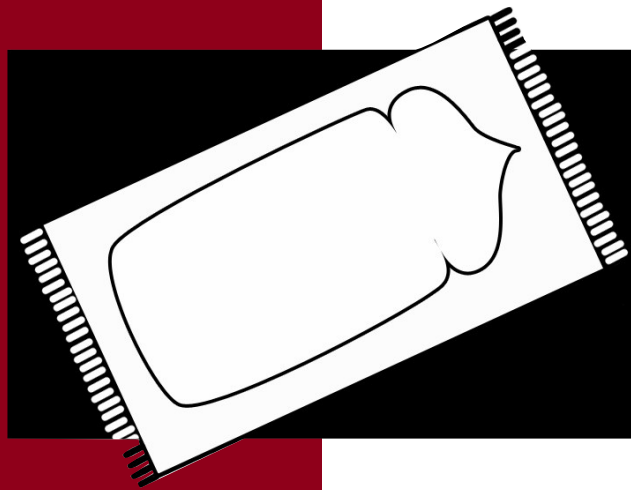


How to Establish a Prayer Room on Campus



Muslim Students Association National : Muslim Accommodations Task Force Series
www.msanational.org/matf

The Muslim Accommodations Task Force

The Muslim Accommodations Task Force (MATF) of MSA National works to make campuses better places for Muslim students. "Muslim friendly" campuses are ones that practically embrace diversity by fulfilling the needs of their Muslim communities. Students and administrators work hand in hand to promote programs that facilitate multiple facets of a student's life, ranging from praying to learning to dining.

We believe that every campus can improve in meeting Muslim student needs. As you will see, becoming "Muslim friendly" is not a one size fits all process. This guide is created to help you explore the options available, select the level appropriate to your campus, and tailor your efforts accordingly.

Know that achieving Muslim accommodations on your campus requires planning and persistent effort. As a source of inspiration, we share with you a hadith. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "...he who finds relief for one who is hard pressed, Allah would make things easy for him in the Hereafter." (Sahih Muslim Book 035, Number 6518). Inshaallah the results of your efforts will make life easier for generations of students after you, and thereby leave you with a legacy of reward.

Sincere thanks is due first to Allah (swt) then to all the students, alumni, and advisors who contributed their experiences and thoughts.

Definitions

Daily Prayers and Friday Prayers

Islam is one of the three major religions of the world. It is a monotheistic religion that obligates all Muslims to perform certain mandatory duties, one of which is prayer. Muslim prayer is based on a lunar calendar, which causes the timings for the five daily prayers to vary between 5:00 am to 12:00 midnight. Each prayer must be performed within a limited time frame and completed prior to the next prayer time. The prayers can occur in a group or in an individual manner; the group prayer is preferred and more vocal. The prayer includes bowing and prostrating to Allah (God), and reciting from the scripture, the Qur'an. On Fridays, the Muslim holy day, congregational prayer is mandatory. Due to these various facets of Muslim prayer, having access to a Muslim prayer room (musallah) on campus would eliminate the problems that Muslims face in observing this mandatory act of worship.

Prayer Room Specifications and Design

A Muslim prayer room on campus should be:

- n Centrally located
- n Accessible to students
- n Clean
- n Accommodate a seating capacity of x (largest prayer in day) people

Additional useful characteristics include:

- n Bookshelves for educational materials
- n Shoe racks (Muslims remove their shoes before entering the prayer room)
- n A closet for cleaning supplies and storage
- n A bulletin board.

Choose The Right Level To Meet Your Needs

Almost all Muslim accommodations come in different levels. The key is to recognize what your campus and especially Muslim students on campus are ready to sustain for the long term.

LEVEL 1

Publicizing the location of the nearest mosque in orientation guides, if it is within walking distance

LEVEL 2

Offering an interfaith space, while clearly accounting for Muslim student requirements (no religious symbols, no images). Quite often, an interfaith space cannot work too well because the 5 Muslim prayers are spread out throughout the day, anywhere from 5 am to 11 pm, which means Muslims would be frequenting the room all day.

LEVEL 3

Providing a space specifically for Muslim students, limited hours. Applicable if located in a building that has limited hours, or for commuter campuses.

LEVEL 4

Providing a space specifically for Muslim students, unlimited hours. An estimated 90% of campuses that have tried to meet student needs jump straight to level 4. All prior levels fall short in a major way of meeting this most important need.

The Process: Steps to Achieving a Prayer Room

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Assessment

2

Presentation

3

Implementation

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Long-term Survival

1

Assessment

Engaging in the assessment process in consultation with the Muslim community at large will inshallah serve two benefits:

- 1) It will provide MSA representatives a solid proposal, backed with facts and evidence, with which to negotiate with university officials.
- 2) It will ensure community support for and participation in a sustained program. As with any type of Muslim religious accommodation, a failed experience will make future negotiations with university officials more difficult.

Before you begin to lobby your university administration to provide an acceptable prayer space on campus, it is critical to assess both

- a) The current prayer room offerings on campus (Supply)
- b) The size and needs of the Muslim population at your school (Demand)

Current Nature of Prayer Offerings (Supply)

In evaluating the status quo of what prayer options are available, it is important to keep in mind the following questions:

1. What is the ease of access to prayer space on campus and to mosques in the surrounding area? Does it become an undue hardship for Muslims to find off campus prayer alternatives? If there is an existing prayer area/space offered, is it conveniently situated, keeping in mind students' needs to pray and reasonably be able to make it to classes?
2. Precisely what is current level of accommodation that is offered (if any)? (Levels include: publicizing off campus location, interfaith prayer space, private space for Muslims).
3. Are any other special interest groups receiving prayer accommodations at your university? Do students of other faith traditions have prayer spaces on campus? Is the university excluding Muslims from equal and fair access to campus privileges and conveniences if alternative options are too inconvenient (on campus) or too far away? Even if other faith traditions do not have prayer space, Muslims may still request a prayer room because of unique prayer needs.

Muslim Population Size and Needs (Demand)

It is important to make sure that the type of prayer accommodations the university may be willing to offer matches the needs of the Muslim community on your campus. Make your requests reasonable. If students usually pray in large numbers on campus for daily and Friday prayers, then a bigger room/space request is warranted. However, if the university is willing to offer a large space while only a smaller number of Muslims frequent the facility at uncoordinated times, the university may view this as a lack of sufficient interest and could take away or end the space altogether

Therefore, it is necessary to survey the relevant Muslim population (students, faculty, administrators, doctors, employees, etc.) to determine the following:

- a) Size (or relative size to other groups receiving special treatment, ie Christian/Jewish students)

Size is a useful indicator to know when negotiating with university officials, to strengthen the case for needing such a space

- b) Hardship

In the absence of an on campus prayer space, what are Muslim students currently doing? Are they running late to classes in trying to fulfill this obligatory duty? Are they being forced to choose between missing class time and missing prayer? Are they praying in potentially unsafe environments or between bookshelves in the library?

- c) % Desiring to pray on campus, and with what frequency

Designating a dedicated prayer space for Muslims might be as simple as room allocation, but it could be an expensive investment for the university if a facility is constructed or redesigned. Therefore, this is perhaps the most critical figure to have on hand in establishing legitimacy of the need and generating support amongst administration officials.

Visit our website

www.msanational.org/matf/prayerguide
for access to Prayer Room Supplement A: Prayer Room Demand Survey

2

Presentation

Leadership

As with most MSA tasks, leadership is essential. Once your MSA decides to make a case for a prayer room on campus, effective leadership will play a major role in the outcome of the endeavor. We recommend one or two committed students who agree to oversee all aspects of the project. Ideally, these students should have played a role in the assessment phase, and if not, should have a thorough understanding of the nature of assessment. They

should also review the definition of Muslim prayer/prayer room, and be prepared to express the Muslim students' needs based on findings from the assessment phase. Because of the possibility that the endeavor will take more than one term, leaders should thoroughly document everything. Practically, this can be as simple as a notebook of meeting dates, times, participants, and minutes.

Contact Administrative Allies

Decision makers or allies with respect to achieving a prayer room on campus would most likely be: Dean of Students, Student Programs Director, Campus Ministry or Student Religious Life Office officials. If you have positive relations with any such administrators, you should inform them of your intention to request a prayer room on campus, get their input, and

see if they are interested in helping or have procedural suggestions. These allies will help you to determine what steps are needed to achieve a prayer room on campus – a presentation to the Dean of Students or Campus Religious Life Office, approval of the University President, discussions with the provost, or other means.

Communicating your proposal

Present your proposal through informal discussion, followed by a formal written proposal to administrators who express the most interest. Ideally, the proposal should be no more than two pages in length. For a sample proposal, visit www.msanational.org/matf/prayerguide to access Supplement B: Prayer Room Sample Proposal

In oral and written communication with administrators who may become involved in approving the project, emphasize the following points which are relevant to your school's context:

a) Requirements and Muslim student need

Emphasize key points discuss the following: Muslim obligation to pray 5 times a day (ie it's not a matter of choice); prayer timings with respect to class schedules; and the importance of a centrally located prayer room so that students do not have to struggle to perform prayer and make it to class on time. Mention also the number of students facing this dilemma.

b) Muslim students' right

When students are required to take classes during certain hours of the day and this intersects with prayer times, the university must enable students to fulfill both obligations. This point is especially critical for students without access to a car if the nearest mosque is too far away to visit in between classes. If any other religious group on campus has access to a private or designated prayer or meditation space, Muslims have the right to equal consideration for an appropriate space that meets requirements.

Note: Avoid rushing to present legal evidence for your claim, as it can create a negative tone to the discussion, and may not be necessary if positive dialogue is working. In some cases, officials may request legal documentation or express concern that the proposal violates the separation of church and state. In such cases, please refer to Supplement C: Legal Issues Related to Campus Muslim Prayer Rooms, available at www.msanational.org/matf/prayerguide.

c) National trends and publicity

The college or university will benefit by having a reputation for caring for their Muslim students. Since we know of over 120 campuses with prayer rooms, consider highlighting rival campuses or ones similar to yours to show how all of them have already met this basic need. Provide a complete list of schools with prayer rooms (updated on www.msanational.org/matf), and then give detailed examples of specific cases based on what you consider to be the ideal option for your campus.

d) Respecting diversity

Most campuses include respecting diversity as a part of their mission statement. They consider enrollment of diverse students an asset to the community, as they enhance the classroom learning experience and enrich student life. Try to find these statements specific to your campus, and explain that providing a designated prayer space for Muslims on campus would serve as a practical example of upholding these ideals. If any cases of bias against Muslims took place on campus in the recent past, present the proposal as an opportunity to foster cooperation and increase understanding.

3

Implementation

Once your proposal is approved by the administration, make sure to work with the overseeing official(s) and facilities management staff to ensure that the space offered is centrally located in a safe location, accessible (some buildings may require special access cards get those if relevant), and clean. Depending on

size and dimensions of the space, it may be helpful to pick a room with two doors, to facilitate separate brothers' and sisters' entrances/sections.

Work with the administration host an open house event if appropriate.

4

Long-term Survival

For the prayer room to serve its intended purpose of enabling Muslims to pray daily prayers on time in between classes, and preferably in congregation, it is important that the following is done when the space is secured:

- n Advertising both at the time of initial opening and on an ongoing basis to new students, employees, etc. who become a part of the campus Muslim community. Be sure to have prominent signs marking the room so that Muslim visitors to the school or those you are not in contact with can find it easily. The MSA website and any brochures should include information on your prayer room.
- n Establishing prayer in the room Encourage Muslims to pray in the room, and designate congregational prayer (iqama) times for the prayers so that those who can may benefit from praying together.
- n Maintenance As the room insha Allah will be frequented by Muslims and curious non Muslims alike, it is important to keep the room clean and welcoming at all times. Try to set up a small library with useful Islamic reading materials in the room.

Additionally, maintain regular contact with university officials, thanking them for their support. This is also important if the university has long term expansion plans a centrally located prayer room may not be so centrally located if class locations shift to distant, newly constructed buildings. If so, it may become necessary to re evaluate the ideal location for a Muslim prayer facility on campus. Similarly, if the room becomes too small to accommodate the growing number of Muslim students, a new facility may allow for a more suitable space.

Finally, report the success to MSA National www.msanational.org/matf so prospective students will know of this accommodation on your campusÖthey may even decide to attend your campus instead of the closest competitor because of better campus accommodations for Muslims.

Sample Success Stories

Rather than focusing on the largest prayer rooms, we present recent successes stories that followed exemplary procedures.

Henry Ford Community College Supports MSA Activity Room!

Muslim students at Henry Ford enjoy praying in the MSA Activity Room. The room is carpeted, sufficiently large for daily prayers, and conveniently located. The accomplishment resulted from the growing activism of the MSA, and was the result of months of perseverance and creativity.

The MSA has been using a room offered by a department by default, but needs a larger room and a long term solution.

A room would not violate separation of church and state, and an alternative name could be used. Request submitted to the Dean of Student Affairs.

Here's how they did it:

① Assessment

Muslims were praying in the library, empty classrooms, and "all over the place."

An initial request was denied because the community was too small and because of concerns as a publicly funded school.

For a time, the MSA reserved rooms on a daily basis for every prayer from zuhr to isha. Then the MSA found a department had vacant rooms due to downsizing and struck a deal to use one room for a semester.

② Presentation

Since the initial request, MSA membership has grown from 5 to 350, and is actively contributing to the community through quality events (some draw 30 faculty members).

③ Implementation

MSA Activity Room approved.

Congregational daily prayer held regularly.

④ Long-term Survival

Advertise availability of room, continue with quality events.

ADVICE: Keep looking for solutions. The best way to get approval for any request is to actively contribute to the campus community. Faculty members will automatically appreciate and support you.

California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) Obtains Prayer Room Approval!

In the spring of 2004, the CSULB MSA got approval for a centrally located prayer room in the Cultural Center of the Student Union. At the time of this publication, the Student Union decided to renovate the Cultural Center into student government offices. Because of the positive relationship with the MSA, however, administrators hope to find a suitable alternative location for the prayer room.

Here's how they did it:

① Assessment

Muslim students were currently praying in empty classrooms, in hallways, stairwells, or outdoors. None of these circumstances were ideal or appropriate for Muslim students.

A past attempt to gain approval for a prayer room through student government was unfruitful.

② Presentation

The MSA decided to approach the Vice President of Student Services

The proposal package included a two page proposal, letters of support from a Muslim associate dean and MSA National, a media article on Muslim accommodations, and a list of currently existing Muslim prayer rooms.

In discussion, the MSA President thanked the administration for past and current support, emphasized safety issues, and expressed the hardship faced by Muslim students.

③ Implementation

Selecting the exact site is still being discussed because of the renovation of the Student Union. Once the prayer room opens, the MSA plans to decorate the room, hold an open house, and establish regular congregational prayer and activities.

ADVICE Positive relationships with administrators can help overcome any other obstacles or challenges.

Ohio State University Students Pray in the Student Union!

As of 2003, Ohio State University established a prayer room for Muslim students in the Student Union. In order to facilitate late night qiyam during Ramadan, Muslim students have access to the room after regular operating hours.

Here's how they did it:

① Assessment

- Networked with on campus Muslim groups and other student groups
- Contacted CAIR Ohio and Muslim lawyers for legal advice
- Contacted MSA National for resources and list of other campuses with prayer rooms
- Convened a prayer room committee of 5-7 people

② Presentation

- Presented the idea to several administrators. Got positive responses, but no concrete action was being taken.
- Expressed need, hardship, and existence of prayer facilities on other campuses.
- Focused meetings with those who had access to actually providing a room. Room approved through the Director of the Student Union.

③ Implementation

- Raised funds for upgrading of prayer room
- Held functions such as meetings, qiyam, and halaqas in the room

④ Long-term Survival

- Tried to promote continuity among new officers so they would continue to improve the room and stay in touch for possibilities of new rooms.

ADVICE Work hard to develop continuity so new executives do not have to "reinvent the wheel." Because students graduate and leave, maintaining momentum for a project is difficult.

Things to avoid

As you read through the success stories, know that a number of prayer room proposals have been rejected, and a few discontinued. The top reasons for rejection? Reliance on legal arguments or mass petitions. The top reason for discontinuation? Muslim students not using the room.

Resources/Contacts

To establish contact with a MATF Consultant who specializes in prayer rooms on campus, send an e mail to matfprayer@msa-national.org. Your MATF Consultant will work with you to provide the following services as appropriate:

- n Phone / e mail consultation
- n Letter of Support from MSA National
- n List of campuses with prayer rooms on MSA National letterhead
- n Research Assistance
- n Proposal Comment and Review

Print out the relevant prayer calendar for your locale on a semesterly basis for administration officials by entering your zip code on <http://www.islamicfinder.org>

For all Prayer Guide Supplements and additional beneficial articles, visit www.msanational.org/matf/prayerguide.



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